THE LIFE AND ACTIVITIES OF SIR ASHTON LEVER OF ALKRINGTON, 1729-1788

BY

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SIR ASHTON LEVER OF ALKRINGTON, AND HIS MUSEUM 1729-1788

By W. J. SMITH, A.T.D.

ON 5 March 1728/9, Dorothy, wife of Darcy Lever of Alkrington, gave birth to her third child, a son, at Alkrington Hall.[1] Two weeks later the child was baptised at Middleton Church, his parents giving him the name Ashton, his mother's family name.

His father, Darcy Lever, was the proud descendant of a merchant family which had acquired wealth and position by the end of the seventeenth century.[2] Born on 12 March 1703,[3] Darcy Lever was educated at Brasenose College, Oxford, matriculating in February 1722 at the age of 19; he then studied law at Gray's Inn and received the degree of Doctor of Civil Law in July 1733. From student days Darcy was the close friend of John Byrom of Manchester[4] but, for all the friendship that existed between them, Darcy omitted to inform Byrom of his intended marriage. Byrom, then in London, heard from his sister Ann that Darcy had married on the 3 May 1725; he took umbrage, for his sister Phebe later wrote to persuade him to write to Darcy, which he eventually did, accompanying the letter with some verses which were well received. A reunion took place in Manchester during August 1725

1 The other children were; Frances, b. 1726, d. same year; Catherine, b. 1727 d. 1728; Anne, b. 1730 d. same year; John, b. 1733 d. 1807; Dorothy, b. 1735; Mary, b. 1740 d. 1745.

2 The Levers of Alkrington were a branch of the Levers of Great Lever, seated at Little Lever and Darcy Lever in the early seventeenth century. They were clothiers whose business prospered and in 1627 John and Robert Lever, sons of Robert Lever of Darcy Lever, bought the 'manor' of Alkrington from Thomas and John Legh. The moiety of the estate was acquired later by John Lever, whose son, Robert, married Anne, daughter of Nicholas Mosley of Collyhurst, and so laid the fortunes of the family. By the end of the century he was possessed of the 'manor' of Alkrington, Gorton Hall and demesne, Collyhurst Hall and demesne, Heaton Old Hall and demesne, and land and property in Tonge, Prestwich, Middleton, Bamford, Heaton, Heaton Fallowfield, Blackley, Heywood, Grindlowe, Chorlton, Chadderton, Barlow Cross in Manchester, Mosley House on Deansgate, house and land on Fennel Street, shops in Toad Lane, and a house and land at the top of Market Street Lane. Robert died in 1710 and was succeeded by his surviving son, John, who was in turn succeeded in 1718 by his eldest son, Darcy. By Darcy's generation, the Levers of Alkrington had become minor gentry leaving the business to be carried on by the London branch of the family.

3 While many authorities give the year as 1705, a MS account of the Levers, from which extracts were printed in the *Manchester Guardian* in 1849, gives the year as 1703; this agrees with the inscription on a portrait of Darcy Lever which reads 'Anno Domo 1733 Aetatis 30'.

4 See *Private Journals and Literary Remains of John Byrom*, Chetham Society O.S., XXXII, XXXIV, XL, XLIV.

when they drank coffee together, after which they went to a musical concert. At this concert Darcy asked Byrom for his loadstone to which Byrom remarked, 'I told him it was at his service.' Darcy was forgiven.

Darcy's bride was Dorothy, daughter and co-heiress of the Reverend William Ashton, Rector of Prestwich,[5] on whose death in 1731, Darcy and his wife inherited £4,000, and, by a codicil, the Ashton Chapel in Prestwich church was left to Dorothy Lever and her son Ashton and heirs male. The money inherited was put to good use when he turned his attention to the improvement of his Alkrington estate.[6] In the valley of the Wince Brook he built three farmhouses which all carried the inscription 'D.L.D. 1731',[7] and two years later a cottage was built in Alkrington Park. The old bridge over the river Irk, which carried the drive from the old Manchester to Rochdale turnpike to the hall, was widened and a stone built into the downstream side of the bridge to commemorate this and the degree of LL.D., conferred on him on 11 July 1733.[8] Two years later a new hall arose on the site of the earlier building.

The old hall was not a large structure, having less than six hearths in 1666, and, as no remains of it have survived, it can be assumed that it was a half-timbered building in common with the other local manorial seats at this time.[9] To a young and wealthy man with a family and a social position to be maintained, this old hall was inadequate and a home to equal those then being built by other wealthy Mancunians was necessary. Very likely Darcy Lever was his own architect, his design being influenced by what he had seen when at Oxford, together with the handbooks on architecture such as those written by James Gibbs and Giacomo Leoni, which were frequently used by the dilettante gentry. In 1735 the first bricks were laid and a stone bearing his name and the date '1735' was placed over a basement doorway. The fabric was completed within the year.[10] The hall is a large rectangular building of red brick with stone dressings nine bays in length and

5 Her sister, Katherine, married John Blackburne of Orford Hall, Warrington, whose interests in botany and natural history made him famous in his time—he was the second gentleman in England to cultivate the pineapple.

6 This comprised almost the whole of the township. While Alkrington had been earlier described as a manor, there is no evidence that it was in fact so.

7 Lancashire Fold, Mill Fold and Brookside Farm, which is the only one now surviving. High Barn Farm may be of this date, but no datestone survives, although some architectural details are similar to Brookside.

8 The bridge bears two other date stones: 'RL 1636 JL', for Robert and John Lever, and '1652 RL' for Robert Lever who died 1710.

9 Such as Middleton Hall (demolished 1845) and Tonge Hall.

10 Date '1735' on roof.

three wide; the design is scholarly and dignified and presents a competent essay in provincial Palladianism.[11]

In the year following the completion of his new home, Darcy Lever served as High Sheriff of Lancashire (the knowledge that he would hold the office in the immediate future may have been a spur to rebuilding Alkrington Hall) and he appointed the Rev. John Clayton as his chaplain and Dr. Thomas Deacon as his medical adviser, giving a fine Jacobite flavour to the High Sheriff's year of office![12] The young Ashton came to know the friends of his father quite well, for Dr. Deacon looked after him when he, his brother John, and his sisters, caught smallpox in the summer of 1736,[13] and Clayton had charge of his education. Ashton Lever had a particularly severe attack of smallpox which left him marked for the remainder of his life, but just prior to this illness his portrait was painted. This shows him to have been a handsome youth with dark lustrous eyes and rich brown hair.[14] In December 1736, Darcy Lever was in London to receive a knighthood following his term of office. He was in haste and had to wait until January of the following year for the king to return to this country and confer the honour upon him. George II turned down the suggestion that he be made a baronet,[15] but Darcy's anticipation of his knighthood is evident today by the knight's helmet and date '1736' over the north entrance to Alkrington Hall.

Sir Darcy died on 16 August 1742 at the age of 39, and in a letter to his wife John Byrom makes it evident that the illness and death of his friend was sudden.[16] Ashton Lever was then 13.[17] His education had been entrusted to the Rev. John Clayton whose school, St. Cyprians, was founded in Salford in the early 1730's. Ashton became one of the first pupils, together with Edward Byrom and Charles White. The school was established for the sons of wealthy parents who desired a more markedly religious atmosphere than was afforded by the more lax Manchester school, and who also wished their sons to avoid association with other boys of a less favoured social level.[18] The pupils were in the main

11 Externally the hall has changed very little, but only two rooms now retain any of the original panelling and only one of the original fireplaces survives. The two wings shown on the drawing from Casson and Berry's *Map of Manchester* 1741 have been altered or rebuilt.

12 From 1733 to 1753, Dr. Deacon lived in Lever House, Fennel St. (Manchester Central Library, M9/40/2/10, Manchester Poor Rate Book). A sketch of this house by Thomas Barritt is in the *Manchester Scrap Book*, Chetham's Library, 11399.

13 *Byrom's Journal, op. cit*, XL, 60.

14 At the same time portraits were painted of Darcy Lever, his wife Dorothy with daughter Martha, and John their second son.

15 *Byrom's Journal, op. cit.*, 83 and 91.

16 *Ibid.*, 44, 329.

17 The first biography to appear of Ashton Lever was printed in the *European Magazine* for August 1784, 83-85. In the obituary notice in the same journal (Feb. 1788) it is stated that the material had been provided by Ashton Lever himself.

18 A. A. Mumford *Manchester Grammar School*, (1919), 161.

recruited from the prosperous Jacobite and Tory families. It was at this school that the young Ashton displayed his 'turn of mind and the bent of his inclination' when he always had the greatest quantity of marbles, the largest top, or the highest pair of stilts; signs of an indulgent mother, which indeed Dame Dorothy was; in later years Ashton Lever acknowledged his indebtedness to his mother for teaching him benevolence and humanity.[19]

From Clayton's school, Lever entered Corpus Christi College, Oxford, on 1 April 1748, as a Gentleman Commoner. He matriculated but did not take any other academic qualifications, instead he devoted his time and energy to the horse. His reputation for horsemanship when at Oxford was long remembered by fellow students and local ostlers, and, later, when at Alkrington, Ashton made a reputation as a horse trainer and allowed his grooms to teach anyone who so wished his method of managing horses. In this he was quite remarkable:

> he has frequently had five or six hunters at a time all lying down and resting at the word of command; fetching, carrying, opening and shutting doors, and many other tricks. The docility of these animals was to be excelled only by their excellence any one of them would carry their owner equal with the best foxhounds in the kingdom.

For a time Ashton Lever lived at Grantham, Lincolnshire, in order to be able to hunt with the Marquis of Granby, and on those occasions was always certain to take the lead in the chase.[20]

Lever's great interest in and love of horses led him to take an active part in re-establishing the Manchester Races in 1761. A race meeting had been held during October of the previous year on Kersal Moor—the first official meeting since 1745—and, when the second was announced in the Manchester papers during August, there was opposition from the landowners of the Moor. The announcement of the forthcoming race meeting was signed by the two appointed Stewards, Ashton Lever and William Hulton, who notified the public that the Manchester Races were to be held on Kersal Moor from 21 to 23 October 1761. In the following issue of the paper there appeared a denial that the races would take place, signed by two of the land owners, Dorothy Byrom and Edward Cheetham; they claimed that their permission to use the Moor had been neither sought nor given. The stewards' reply indicated that consent had been given by the two objecting landowners in the previous year and that this consent had not been limited in time: further, they, the stewards, had a signed agreement made with Dorothy Byrom for the use of the Moor for race meetings

[19] *European Magazine, op. cit.*
[20] *Ibid.*

for seven years from 1760. Edward Cheetham refused to acknowledge the agreement and continued in his opposition to the races being held 'on account of the many bad Consequences that attend them.' Meanwhile assurance was continually given to the public in the local papers that the races would be held and eventually the objecting landowners capitulated and in the *Manchester Mercury* of 12 October 1761 appeared:

> We have now the Satisfaction to inform the Publick that the Misunderstandings which have unfortunately happened about the Manchester Races, are happily reconciled; and that Mr Chetham Mrs Byrom and Mrs Chetham of Smedley, have been pleased, upon the Interposition of Friends, to give their Assent to this Year's Races; and to avoid all future Disputes on the Subject we declare that the Consent now given is expressly confined to the present Year only.
>
> Ashton Lever.
> William Hulton.

Both Anne Cheetham and Dorothy Byrom died before the races were due to be held again in the following year, so there was no further opposition and the races have been held regularly ever since.[21]

Surprisingly Ashton Lever's name does not appear among the lists of owners at the Manchester Races, or others held in the area, but on two known occasions he ran his horse against those of his friends after the main races of the day. One occasion was

> a Match between Mr Lever's Chestnut horse Liberty, Aged carrying 10 st. and Mr Hulton's Bay Horse, True Blue, five years old, carrying 9 st. One mile for One Hundred Pounds . . . won by the former.[22]

Ashton Lever's desire to excel was still with him and it is doubtful whether the prize money was of much consequence.

It was in connection with the Manchester Races that John Byrom addressed some lines to 'Dear Son of Darcy', following Ashton's lack of deference towards Dorothy Byrom his sister. In these lines Byrom implores Ashton to put his talents to better use

> Than this Horse-racing Stewardship can be;
> Some nobler theme for you to judge upon
> Than—Hey! they come, they come!
> They're gone, they're gone.

to temper his volatile spirit and to take stock of where his present mode of life would lead him; and reference is made to the part played by Ashton in the Races of 1761,

21 *Manchester Mercury* from 11 Aug. to 12 Oct. 1761. Hereafter referred to as *M.M.*
22 *M.M.* 10 Sep. 1764.

. . . and if, unsure
Of legal Right, you will command the Moor
You, whose Resentment was so lately shown
In case of Fishpond Property your own
Will bear the blame of such an ugly job
As can succeed by nothing but a Mob
Evil disposed persons may Abscond
Yet steal the Fish of Ashton Lever's Pond[23]
And tho' severity should advertise
Its utmost prosecution, gain their Prize
But Ashton Lever cannot well invade
His neighbours land to make a Cavalcade
Or sale of liquors and the mobbing sort
Not Fish about him for their Kind of sport.[24]

It is quite evident that in his youth, Ashton Lever lacked the steadying and guiding hand of a father, and took advantage of an indulgent mother—and a not inadequate income—to lead a life of pleasure; a circumstance conveniently forgotten when he was preparing his autobiographical notes in later years.

According to legend—which there seems little reason to doubt—it was during this time that Ashton Lever paid court to Mary Assheton, the eldest daughter and co-heiress of Sir Ralph Assheton, Bart., of Middleton; but that doughty gentleman was little impressed with the middle-ageing suitor, and refused consent to a union between the two families. The legend continues that Ashton Lever built Alkrington Cottage (now demolished) on the high ground overlooking Middleton Hall park, from which he could look down upon his lost love. Mary Assheton eventually married Harbord Harbord, M.P., son and heir of Sir William Morden Harbord of Gunton, Norfolk, on 7 October 1760, and Middleton became allied to the Suffield estates.[25] If Ashton Lever had been successful in his suit, he would have become possessed of one of the largest estates in the county, comprising the Alkrington, Middleton and Thornham townships. Samuel Bamford turned this legend into a romantic poem called *The Wild Rider* in which he portrays the frustrated Ashton galloping wildly about the countryside and up and down the stone steps leading to Rochdale church! But whatever the truth may have been, four years after the marriage of Mary Assheton, Ashton Lever married Frances Bayley, daughter of James Bayley of Withington, at Prestwich church on 23 December 1764. He was then aged 35 and his bride 18. By this

[23] In the *M.M.* are many notices from Ashton Lever offering a reward for information leading to the apprehension of poachers in Alkrington, with leniency if the malefactor owned up and turned king's evidence.

[24] Chetham's Library, *Raines MSS*, XLV, 39. These verses are among others directed by Byrom to be destroyed after his death. See also Chetham Society N.S., LXX, 42.

[25] Eleanor Assheton married Sir Thomas Egerton of Heaton, and her portion of the inheritance included the manor of Radcliffe.

marriage he became connected with the Mosley and Rashbotham families.

Ashton's interest in the animal kingdom was not limited to horses or hounds; at quite an early age he collected live birds, which he first kept in his mother's house on Market Street Lane, Manchester, and then at Alkrington Hall. Here he pursued his hobby with vigour and eventually his collection totalled nearly four thousand birds. As an instance of his zeal, he

> frequently rode from London to Alkrington with cages full of birds, which he brought safe, by holding them with a full stretched arm, and galloping his horse till the arm was tired, and then stopping to change hands.[26]

About the year 1760 his interests in natural history took on a change of direction, and, while he was at Margate, he began to collect sea shells. On being informed by a curious observer that there was a large consignment of shells then being sold at Dunkirk, he immediately hired a boat and sailed for France, where he purchased the whole cargo which was sent to Alkrington. With these he began his famous natural history collection to which he was to devote the remainder of his life. The live birds, which took up too much room and time, he gave to his friends and replaced them with cases of fossils, both native and foreign. To these were later added stuffed birds, to which his attention had been drawn when viewing a collection of them at the Spring Gardens in London; and it was this same collection that he was determined to rival and excel and so produce the largest and most comprehensive museum in the kingdom.[27]

The first tentative and public display of his collection was made in April 1766, when a 'Collection of Birds and Beasts' was shown at the King's Arms, Smithy Door in Manchester, for a week. The exhibition proved a great success, the

> Curious of all Degrees resorted to see them, being sensible that Prodiges like these, very rarely make their Appearance among us.

The success was so marked that the proprietor was invited to show his collection for a few days longer, with which request he readily complied. While the collection was on view, two 'curious birds' were added, the Golden Eagle and the Osprey.[28] Following this

[26] *Europ. Mag., op. cit.*

[27] *Ibid.*

[28] *M.M.*, 22 and 28 April 1766. While the name of the 'Proprietor' is not given in the paper, it is difficult to find who else, other than Ashton Lever, could have presented this display at this time. The notice of the exhibition was accompanied by some verses 'Wrote by a young Lady . . .'

exhibition, curiosities and specimens of natural history were presented to Ashton Lever by many of his neighbours and acquaintences; Robert Lancashire of Heaton gave him a robin's nest complete with one egg, and a conch shell containing a swallow's nest discovered near Alkrington Hall also found its way to the collection, as did a swallow's nest built on the suspended corpse of an owl. Thomas Barritt also gave several items of antiquarian interest. By 1770 Ashton Lever had extended his quest to foreign lands, and leaflets were printed listing those items he wished to obtain together with instructions on their preservation and packing; notes giving details of their discovery etc., were to be added whenever possible. Copies of this leaflet, followed by a more elaborate one in 1773,[29] were sent by Lever's friends to their friends and agents in different parts of the world. What excitement there must have been when a cargo of curiosities arrived at Alkrington Hall! It was a time when Ashton Lever invited friends to share in the wonder as each packing case was opened and the marvels and beauties from lands strange and unknown were seen for the first time:[30] the squirrel monkey, the arctic fox, the flamingo, bird of paradise, saw fish, corals, tomahawks, scalping knives and other weapons were all part of the museum—as it was now described—at Alkrington Hall in 1772.

In the previous year the museum had been opened to the public, and as its reputation grew it became necessary for Ashton Lever to insert a notice in the Manchester papers during October 1771[31] advising those who wished to see the museum to do so in the mornings and so avoid being refused admittance if they came after two o'clock. The popularity of the museum eventually caused him to publish a further notice in September 1773 as follows:

> This is to inform the Public, That being tired out with the insolence of the common People whom I have hitherto indulged with a sight of my Museum I am now come to the Resolution of refusing Admittance to the lower Classes, except they come provided with a Ticket from some Gentleman or Lady of my Acquaintance; and I hereby authorise every Friend of mine to give a Ticket to any orderly Man to bring eleven Persons besides himself; whose Behaviour he must be answerable for according to the Directions he will receive before they are admitted.[32]

[29] A copy is preserved among the *Spencer George Perceval Bequest* in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. S. G. Perceval made a collection of material for a history of scientific museums which included many items relating to the Leverian Museum. A projected, but unpublished, paper on Ashton Lever and his Museum by Perceval was announced in the last issue of the *Palatine Note Book*, May 1885.

[30] Letter dated Alkrington, 13 January 1770, 'Dear Hopwood, I am expecting a large Cargo of Curiosities this afternoon and shall be glad to have you at the Opening of them: I am yours affectionately, Ashton Lever.' This was to Edmund Hopwood of Rhodes Green whose *Commonplace Book* contains many notices of his neighbour and friend.

[31] *M.M.*, 8 to 29 Oct. 1771.

[32] *Manchester Journal*, 18 Sep. 1773.

To limit the number of visitors still further he later refused admittance to those who arrived on foot. Soon after this notice appeared a party arrived at Alkrington on foot and were refused admittance, but an enterprising gentleman, in order to circumvent the ruling, mounted a cow, found in a nearby lane, and rode back to the hall whereupon Ashton Lever, appreciating this touch of humour in ingenuity, admitted the rider and his party. These visits to the museum were entirely free and often Ashton Lever acted as host to parties to whom he offered both the sight of his museum and the entertainment of his table; and what entertainment it must have been with their host exhibiting his skill with animals and birds: even a goose had been trained to perform the office of servant and wait behind Lever's chair at table, with a napkin under its wing![33] One impressed visitor was 'T.B.' from Halifax who stayed a few days at Alkrington in the autumn of 1772 and later wrote an account of what he saw for the *Gentleman's Magazine*:[34]

> I shall begin with the quadrupeds, of which there are about 60 distinct species, preserved each in a glass case; of these I noticed the following, viz. the Squirrel Monkey, the Coati Mondi, . . . the opposum, . . . the Mexican Mulk Hog, and the Leopard Cat. Imperfect conceptions, or what are improperly called Lusus Naturae, viz. a double headed Calf, a Pig with eight legs, two tails, one backbone, and one head; a Leveret with seven legs, eight feet, and one head; a Kitten with two bodies and one head; (and more). Out of upwards of 160 species of birds, natives of or killed in England . . . Amongst the birds are the following singular conceptions, and out of the way colours; a Chick with two heads to one body; one with two bodies and only one head; A Duck with a foot growing out of its head; a white Starling; a yellow Robin; a white Sparrow, and a dun wagtale. Of the exotics; out of upwards of 100 well-preserved specimens I selected the following, viz. the Southern Penguin, the Flamingo, the Scarlet Maccau, a bird of Paradise, the Booby, the Cardinal Bird, the Banana bird, with many more equally curious.
>
> Upwards of 100 specimens of English fishes, viz. the Lump fish, the Skuttle fish, the Ink fish, the Gilt Char, the Sturgeon, the Lamprey, the Eelpout.
>
> From these I will procede to the exotics, of which I numbered upwards of 100 species, and noted the following, viz. the Trumpet fish, the Remora or Sucking fish, the Porcupine fish, the Sting Ray, the Urchin or Hedgehog fish, and the Weasel fish. Upwards of 200 specimens of shells, amongst which are many rare and valuable.
>
> Of Serpents, Lizards, Frogs, Toads, etc., preserved in spirits, upwards of one hundred distinct specimens.
>
> Of Lobsters, Crabs and large Beetles, upwards of 100 species. Upwards of 200 kinds of birds eggs, with a great number of curious shells.
>
> There are no less than 1100 specimens of Fossils, many hundreds of which are capital ones. Upwards of 200 specimens of foreign marbles, and a perfect assortment of Derbyshire marbles. Upwards of 1000

[33] *Europ. Mag., op. cit.*
[34] *Gentleman's Magazine*, 1773, part I, 219-221. As this is the first comprehensive account of the museum, it is included here in extenso.

> kinds of medals, besides a great number of casts; and upwards of 200 capital drawings, highly finished after natural subjects in this Museum . . .[35]
>
> A few pictures of birds in straw, very natural; a basket of flowers cut in paper . . . There are a great number of antique Dresses and parts of dresses of our own and other nations . . . Near 200 species of warlike instruments, ancient and modern; . . . There is a head of his present Majesty, cut in Cannil Coal, said to be a striking likeness . . . Here is also a drawing in Indian ink of a head of the late Duke of Bridgewater, valued at 100 guineas . . . There are also a great number of plants and insects, of which I shall take no notice at present.

And nearly all these exhibits were in

> Upwards of 1300 glass cases . . . placed in three rooms, besides four sides of rooms shelved from top top to bottom, with glass doors before them.

Quite a considerable collection, and expensively housed! When Thomas Barritt visited the museum in 1774, he described the collection as occupying 'four large rooms ranging almost the whole front of the large building, the wall formerly dividing the apartments being form'd into Arches to support the chambers above'. It is a pity that both writers were not more explicit in their description of the position of the rooms; they probably included the entrance hall, library, and west wing of the hall—all on the north front away from the sun.[36]

His obsession with his museum did not exclude Ashton Lever from public life. In January 1766 he was made a Justice of the Peace for the Salford Division, and he attended his duties diligently being 'particularly attentive to prevent trifling litigious suits'. He served on the Grand Jury at the Lancaster Assizes in 1766 and again in 1786, and in 1771 he served his term as High Sheriff of the county,[37] appointing his younger brother, John (who was then a curate at Buxton) as his chaplain. He was also a Freemason of the Unanimity Lodge at Manchester which then met at Crompton's Coffee House.[38] Agriculture also interested him and he became a member of the Agricultural Society of Manchester, of which his close friend T. Butterworth Bayley was vice-president. Although Ashton Lever does not appear to have been an active member of the Society, he was nevertheless most interested in any new developments or discoveries in agriculture. In 1770 he experimented with some Siberian barley given to him by T. B. Bayley.

[35] Some drawings by Sarah Stone of exhibits from Ashton Lever's Museum are in the British Museum (Natural History) Library.
[36] Through internal alterations made within the last sixty years, it is no longer possible to confirm the exact position of these rooms.
[37] *M.M.*, 29 Jan. 1771.
[38] This Lodge lapsed in 1805.

No doubt encouraged by the efforts and success of other Lancashire landowners, Ashton Lever prospected for coal on his Alkrington estate, and found several seams near to the surface in a gulley leading from the Lancashire Fold down to Wince Brook. The first seam was found near to the brook and the coal was reached by cutting into the steep bank. This seam was a narrow one of inferior quality and later a shaft was sunk higher up the gully and a lower seam reached. Exactly when these operations commenced is unknown, but John Poole in his diary records an accident at the Alkrington Coal Pits on 2 June 1772, when

> by the works falling in owing to the negligence of some of the workmen, by which three of the Poor Coaliers are terribly hurt, limbs and Back Broak, and other was sadly bruised, so that there lives are dispared of.

The full extent of these coal workings is not known, but on a survey of the mines made prior to their closing in 1841,[39] there is indicated in the region of the old workings, at the bottom of the shaft nearest the brook and travelling east for a quarter of a mile, an 'old boat way'. Could Ashton Lever have utilised some of the drainage water to transport the coal from the coal faces to the bottom of the shaft, not unlike the system employed by the Duke of Bridgewater at Worsley? It is very likely, remembering his keen interest in any innovations.

Recognition for his endeavours in the field of natural history came in February 1773, when, together with T. B. Bayley, he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society, being recommended by his proposers

> from our personal knowledge of him as a Gentleman, who to other useful and shining qualifications unites a high degree of Taste for Natural History. Equally munificent and indefatigable in his pursuit of this branch of knowledge, he has with infinite assiduity and expence furnished a Museum, which may be justly deemed one of the noblest monuments of private Industry in Great Britain.[40]

Lever's application for membership was supported by six fellows, of whom at least three, viz. Henry Hoghton, Thomas Percival and Charles White, were personally known to him; the other three, no doubt co-opted to lend weight to the application, were Arthur Lee, M.D., John Paradise and James Petty.

In this same year, Ashton Lever first made the acquaintance of another celebrated naturalist—Gilbert White—through the latter's brother, the Rev. John White. In 1772, John White was presented

39 Plans in Surveyors Dept., National Coal Board.
40 The wording of the election certificate communicated by courtesy of the Librarian, The Royal Society.

to the living of Blackburn church, but did not take up residence until May of the following year. He soon made the acquaintance of Ashton Lever and wrote to his brother about him, for in Gilbert White's answering letter, dated 26 June 1773, he writes[41]

> It is plain Mr. Lever knows nothing of the grasshopper-lark, if he did, he would not confound it with the sedge-bird, to which it bears not the least resemblance either in person, song, or manner of life . . . Mr. Lever is, I perceive, a very adroit *natural* Naturalist, it is therefore pity he does not allow himself the advantage of books, and call in the assistance of system . . .

Apparently John White had described the museum at Alkrington and had commented on some inaccuracies in the labelling of exhibits, which strongly suggests that Ashton Lever was self-taught in matters of natural history, seeking information when needed. Gilbert White wrote to his brother again in August

> So Mr Lever does not know the grasshopper lark; that is plain. . . . He seems to be unacquainted with the laughing sort . . . Mr Lever may very probably be right with respect to the short eared owl. I have always suspected that Mr P[ennant's] tawney owl and brown owl were only different sexes of the same species.

and on 11 September 1773

> Mr Derham in his 'Physico-theol', incidentally mentions Dr. Leigh's *Natural History of Lancashire,* which perhaps Mr Lever has got, and you should see . . . Mr Lever, I find, is an excellent *practical* ornithologist, if we are to correspond who is to break the ice? and on what subjects are we to exchange thoughts? He will, I hope, study system.

The correspondence with Lever does not appear to have materialised, for in a letter to his brother, Gilbert asks 'Does Mr. Lever know anything about the bank-martin that can be depended upon?' as he, Gilbert, did not know much about it. The last phrase indicates a certain reservation about the qualities of Ashton Lever, although in January of the following year (1774) he was asking his brother

> Another (monography) on the house-swallow is near completed; from which I propose to proceed to the rest of the British *Hirundines.* Can Lever send me any authentic remarks? Pray tell me over again the story of the swallow building on the dead owl's wings and on the conch, etc., I think I could make good use of it.

It later appeared in Letter 57 to Daines Barrington in the *Natural History of Selborne.*

Lever proved to be both helpful and generous to John White, although Thomas Pennant held other views. Gilbert wrote to John:

[41] *Life and Letters of Gilbert White,* ed. R. Holte-White, (1901) I, 217, *et seq.*

> Lever is a generous man, and is of vast service to you by lending you all his books; I hope Mr P[ennant] will bethink himself, and wipe off the imputation of selfishness that he lies under.

The laudatory comments are repeated in a further letter in April 1774:

> Mr Lever, I find, continues wonderfully generous, and helpful by means of his books; if it was not for the General [Cornwallis] you should, I think, dedicate your work to him.[42] In my monography I have made honourable mention of his museum. Pray where did he get his little mouse? I mean by that to enquire whether it is common in Lancashire. For I concluded, as it had escaped Ray, that it did not extend far northward.

The monograph mentioned in the letter was on British Swallows and was read before the Royal Society in February 1774. Lever's generosity to John White was reciprocated by Gilbert who instructed his brother by letter

> If Mr Lever desires to see my papers, let him have them; he is a man of honor and will not suffer them to be transcribed. I beg his objections and additions.

When the papers were returned by John White, Gilbert was most disappointed to find no comments by Lever, and in his reply to John he wrote

> My best thanks are due for your strictures on my monographies, of which I shall avail myself in many particulars, and hope you will extend them to the swift. But I am greatly disappointed with respect to Mr. Lever from whom, as a good practical ornithologist, I expected several new remarks and observations, but I don't find that he sent you *one*.

This action—or lack of it—by Ashton Lever suggests that here was to be found a weakness; while his knowledge of the things in his museum was adequate, to say the least, thanks partly to the details supplied by their donors, and partly to the library that he was building up, from Gilbert White's letters emerges the fact that he lacked a general background knowledge of Natural History. In later years this defect was remedied, but from this time the relationship between the two naturalists was strained and within a short time Ashton Lever dropped out of Gilbert White's circle of acquaintances.

The museum at Alkrington continued to attract the crowds which flocked to see the ever-growing collection of curiosities. John Poole remarks that on 29 August 1774

42 Cornwallis was influential in securing the living of Blackburn for John White, being the brother of the Archbishop of Canterbury, in whose gift the living was. *Ibid.*, 209.

> This day their was the greatest Concourse of people at Mr Lever's Museum that ever was known the number was Three thousand three Hundred and twenty.

and he emphasised the number by also writing the total in figures and underlining them. On the inside back cover of his diary, Poole enumerated the number of carriages and visitors to Lever's Museum from 26 July to 18 August 1774; the following are some of the figures:

26 July	24 carriages	1040 people
27 July	28 carriages	940 people
28 July	20 carriages	great numbers were not admitted
3 August	20 carriages	318 people
5 August	34 carriages	

These figures, although covering only two weeks, indicate the undoubted popularity of the museum. Ashton Lever was not unique in his hobby which he pursued with a passionate zeal; to collect curios both of antiquity and nature had been a fashionable pursuit long before his birth, and several Lancashire gentry of his generation made collections of considerable value and taste. Henry Blundell of Ince Blundell and Charles Townley both collected antique sculpture, and John Blackburne's botanical collection at Orford hall, later enlarged by his daughter Anne, enjoyed more than a local fame. That Lever should have been preoccupied with natural history is not surprising, for during the eighteenth century a widespread interest had been shown in the subject, and not the least so in Manchester where expanding trade prompted a keen interest in the life and customs of foreign lands.[43]

Among the visitors to the Museum were many of the nobility who frequently advised Lever not to bury his collection in an obscure corner of the kingdom, but rather to remove it to London, 'in order that it might be of public utility'. Some promised him their patronage if he would comply with their suggestions. While Ashton Lever deliberated upon the idea, his wife and family tried to dissuade him from taking the museum to London, where the expense of housing and keeping the collection up to date would make even greater inroads in the family fortunes, for the museum had been created entirely for his own amusement. As it grew to become a popular feature of the Manchester scene, so the expense of maintenance increased, and as early as 1772 Ashton Lever began to sell some of his Manchester property, beginning with Lever

[43] In the Manchester papers during the eighteenth century appear many notices of public lectures on the 'Natural Philosophies', etc., and many works on natural history and travel were bought by Chetham's Library. See Mumford, *op. cit.*, 155-158 and 178.

Hall on Market Street Lane,[44] to help defray the expenses. During the next eight years, the whole of the Manchester properties were sacrificed for the museum.

Eventually Ashton Lever made up his mind and on 28 July 1774 he set off for London to find a suitable home for his museum. It is typical of the man that this was chosen more as a setting for his ever-increasing collection, than for economy. He took a lease on Leicester House in Leicester Square, the former home of the monarch, George II, a large Carolingian building set back from the square at the rear of which were stables and a large garden.[45]

Lever's new venture came in for comment from Gilbert White who wrote to his brother in August:

> Surely that gentleman's scheme with regard to his museum is a strange one; for as I cannot suppose that a man of his spirit will take money, so, if he entertaines that great beast of a town for nothing, it will cost him thousands and be quite a ruinous expense.

John White wrote to his brother at about the same time expressing his feelings:

> This new enterprise of my friend Lever's disturbs me on many accounts. In the first place, I wished *you* to see the museum in its native spot, Alkrington; in the next it will be gone from this county, of which it was one of the greatest ornaments, and thirdly it will rob me, I fear, of my friendly neighbour for a great part of the year. I heard from him immediately on his arrival in London. His plan is, he says, 'to pursue Natural History and carry the exhibition of it to such a height as no one can imagine; and to make it the most wonderful sight in the world.'
>
> Upon this plan I think he is right to exhibit in London where he will not only collect with more speed, but also make the thing defray its own expences, which no private fortune alone can possibly equal.

At Alkrington Hall the exhibits were carefully dismantled and packed up, and on 12 October 1774, John Poole wrote:

> Ashton Lever's Esqr Grand Museum went off for London in three Waggons, two Carts and a Wagon on Springs for the better convenience of the choicest Articles, it was damaged before it got to my house, am afraid it will not perform.[46]

What anguish and heartache Lever must have experienced before his treasured collection eventually reached London, a journey which would have taken a long time on account of the fragile nature of the shipment.

A little while before the move to London, Thomas Barritt paid a visit and wrote an account of what he saw. This is noteworthy

[44] A sketch of Lever Hall by Thomas Barritt is in the Manchester Local History Library. 'Mr. Lever's House' is shown on the *Map of Manchester and Salford in 1650*.

[45] A drawing of Leicester House as it appeared at this time is to be found in Tom Taylor, *Leicester Square*, (1874).

[46] *John Poole's Diary*, which is mainly a record of weather observations, is among the *Owen MSS*, Manchester Central Library. In 1770 Poole lived at Rhodes Green (*Hopwood, Commonplace Book*).

as it contains an illuminating description of Ashton Lever who, after welcoming his visitors to Alkrington Hall, turned his attention to his exhibits where he '. . . was as busy in the arrangement of his curiosities as a tradesman in his shop'.[47] Barritt then describes his appearance:

> Mr Lever is a Gentleman about the middle size a little bulky of complexion inclining to paleness marked a little with small pox, dark brown eyes exceeding piercing and quick, dark brown lank hair and rather bald his dress at this time green trimmed with gold had on a round plain green hat without loops leather breeches and white ribb'd stockings.

John Ogden also paid tribute to the museum and its owner prior to their removal, in a poem published in the *Manchester Journal* 6 August 1774.

In February 1775, the Leverian Museum—or *Holophusicon* as Lever later called it—opened its doors to the public, and yet another museum appeared on the London scene. Apart from the British Museum, there were at this time many private collections in London; some were simply coffee-house curios and freaks, others specialist collections housed in the homes of dilettantes and scholars, but open to students and interested members of the public, often without charge.

'Lever has opened his museum at half-a-guinea per head', wrote Gilbert White in March 1775. The admission price was high—although it was later reduced[48]—but the rent and taxes amounted to over £600 per year, and, besides this, considerable alterations had been made to Leicester House in order to accommodate the museum. A dozen rooms were employed to exhibit the collection; those on the front of the building were made to form one continuous range, the partition walls and doors having been removed, arches built and mirrors used to increase the illusion of space.[49] The remainder of the house was occupied by Thomas Waring, employed by Ashton Lever to superintend the museum, and Lever himself had a suite of rooms for use when he was in London, which was necessarily quite often. The number of rooms was later increased to sixteen, so as to include the collection given to Ashton Lever by Captain Cook before his last and fatal voyage in 1776,[50] for he

[47] Chetham's Library, *Barritt MSS*, 8026, p 14.

[48] From 1778 to 1780 it was 5s. 3d. and from 1781 to 1786 it was reduced to 2s. 6d. per person.

[49] *Europ. Mag.*, Jan. 1782, 17. In this first issue of the magazine appeared, *A Description of the Holophusicon or Sir Ashton Lever's Museum.*

[50] See *Diary of Sylas Neville*, (1950). 'Aug 1782: Great Additions have been made since I last visited the museum before in the summer '77—besides the matchless collection made by the late unfortunate Capt. Cooke in his different voyages of discovery to the South Seas.'

> so much admired this good Ashton's intellect that he gave him a complete collection of all kinds of South Sea curiosities which . . . seems much vaster even than the one in the British Museum.[51]

On entering Leicester House, the visitor proceeded up the main staircase, on the walls of which were hung cases of stuffed birds, and so into the first room, the Native Fossil Room, which also contained more glass cases of birds—as indeed did all the apartments. A later visitor commented on the expense to which Ashton Lever must have been put in housing and displaying the many exhibits to which he had given some thought on presentation. For instance in one room there was 'a pair of humming birds put in the same case (as an ostrich), by way of contrast, the one being the least and the other the biggest of birds'. But the arrangement of his collection was not to everybody's taste, especially that of the Rev. W. Gilpin, who disliked the extensive use of white cases and the light decor of the rooms. He disagreed with Ashton Lever's theory that a light background would show off the birds plumage to advantage, for, being an amateur painter, he was convinced that a dark background was far more suitable.[52]

With his new premises Ashton Lever widened his scope to include more antiquities, particularly Roman, and especially from Lancashire. John Whitaker in his *History of Manchester* mentions several Roman remains that eventually found their way into the museum, and which were nearly all lost after the break-up of the museum in 1806. Other exhibits of a frivolous nature appeared, such as the stuffed monkeys dressed and arranged to represent human beings in various situations, including, to the horror of Susan Burney, one 'put in the attitude of Venus de Medici, and is scarce fit to be look'd at.'[53]

When he had established himself in London, Ashton Lever was proposed for membership of the Society of Antiquaries, and on 27 January 1776 he was elected a Fellow, his sponsors including Daines Barrington, who became a personal friend and admirer. Lever attended many of the meetings of the Society, and while he never read a formal paper, he often brought along items of interest recently acquired or which could have helped to illustrate papers read by other members; in 1780 he exhibited to the Society the Housekeeping Accounts of Edward I and II, and on another occasion he showed a MS written by Thomas Barritt on archery which accompanied a talk on the subject by Daines Barrington.

51 *Sophie in London*, ed C. Williams, (1933). This was Sophie la Roche who visited England with her eldest son in 1786.
52 *Life and Correspondence of Mary Granville*, ed. Lady Llanover (1862) III, 349.
53 *The Early Diary of Frances Burney 1768-1778*, ed. A. R. Ellis (1889) II, 248.

Although his attention was now principally focused on the museum in London, Lever still found time to take an interest in the affairs of his native county, and when the Manchester Regiment was raised in late 1777 to serve in the War of American Independence, he was one of the first subscribers. He paid the maximum subscription of 100 guineas and became, by virtue of the regulations of the Management Committee, a member of the body; in this capacity he attended many meetings during the months of January, February, March and July of 1778, and on four occasions took the chair. His interest in the well-being of this regiment is illustrated by the story that he was principally concerned in sending a sloop with supplies of potatoes and fresh fruit to the regiment when it was serving with distinction at the siege of Gibraltar in 1781.

> 'This would convince our brave fellows,' writes Sir Ashton, 'that they are not entirely forgot by those who had a hand in bringing them into their present situation, in which they have behaved with so much credit to themselves and honour to their country.'[54]

Public recognition of his work came in 1778, when on the 3 June the *Holophusicon* was visited by the Royal Family and attendants, who

> examined that superb Collection with the utmost attention; paid Mr Lever many compliments on the perfection to which he had brought it, and passed great Encomiums on the Elegance of the Arrangements, and the Grandeur of the whole, which they were graciously pleased to say did credit to the Collector and infinite Honour to the Kingdom.[55]

On the following Friday, the 5th, George III conferred upon Ashton Lever the honour of knighthood, and it was reported in the London papers that his Majesty

> *could do* no less in remembrance of a *house* that had produced one of the greatest curiosities the world ever saw, in his *own* person.[56]

—a comment upon his earlier association with Leicester House. This honour was in recognition of Lever's services to the public and followed a congratulatory address presented to George III by Lever and several other gentlemen, 'on his escape from the Knife of Margaret Nicholson.'[57]

As befalls most people who appear before the public, Sir Ashton became a prey to satire, and in 1779 appeared the following from the pen of Thomas Seddon:[58]

54 *Leicester Square, op. cit.*, 455.
55 *M.M.*, 9 June 1778.
56 Wheatly and Cunningham, *London Past and Present*, II, 381.
57 Extract from a letter dated 29 Dec. 1812 from George Humphrey to James Parkinson; Fitzwilliam Museum, *Perceval Bequest.*
58 *Characteristic Strictures; or remarks on upwards of 100 portraits of the most eminent persons in the counties of Lancashire and Cheshire*, (London 1779).

Sir A..... L.... Knt.
The Museum.

> The artist has not only shown himself perfectly conversant with natural history, but displayed an elegant taste, in the arrangement of his innumerable curiosities; everything is in the highest preservation, the plumage of the birds natural and beautiful as life. We wonder a little *brown linnet* which is suffered to flutter about the rooms, gives so much pleasure to the collector, who, the artist has introduced into the scene, with more the swelling strut of a common showman, than the *dignified* exhibitioner,

thus echoing a comment made by Barritt some five years previously.

The museum was experiencing considerable success and many sightseers wrote enthusiastic descriptions in their diaries and journals, among them the Rev. John Wesley who visited the museum in January 1780. Wesley's interest may have been prompted through his early acquaintance with Sir Darcy Lever whom he had met in Manchester in 1733. He wrote in his journal:

> I spent an hour or two very agreeably in Sir Ashton Lever's museum. It does not equal the British Museum in size, nor is it constructed on so large a plan, as it contains no manuscripts no books, no antiquities, nor any remarkable works of art. But I believe, for natural curiosities, it is not to be excelled by any museum in Europe; and all beasts, birds, reptiles, and insects are admirably well managed and preserved, so that if you saw many of them elsewhere you would imagine they were alive! The hippopotamus, in particular, looks as fierce as if he was just coming out of the river; and the old lion appears as formidable now as when he was stalking in the Tower.[59]

About the year 1776, Thomas Waring—the manager of the museum—contracted a malady of the chest caused by continually bending over a desk. As a cure he tried his hand at archery believing that the exercise would strengthen his weakened chest. It was apparently successful, and Sir Ashton, being made aware of its beneficial effects, also took up archery.[60] Of course the sport was no novelty to him, as it was to southerners, for archery was still being practiced in the north of England. As with other ventures he entered into the sport full of enthusiasm, persuading his friends to try their skill with the bow and organising competitions among them at the butts which he erected in the garden of Leicester House. This group of enthusiasts formed themselves into a society about the year 1780, under the title of Toxophilites and Sir Ashton became the first President, a position which he held up to his death. The uniform of the Toxophilite Society is described by Waring in his *Treatise of Archery* as consisting of, 'a Green Coat, single breasted, with an Archery device engraved on the button,

[59] *Journal of the Rev. John Wesley*, ed. N. Curnock (1915).
[60] T. Roberts, *The English Bowman*, (1801) 79.

Buff Kersymere Waistcoat and Small clothes, Hessian Boots, Hat turned up over the right eye, with a black Feather; a Belt, with Pouch and Tassel.' Thomas Barritt painted a portrait of Sir Ashton in this uniform, wearing on his breast the Gold Medal of the Society presented to him by the members.[61] It was in this garb that Fanny Burney saw him in December 1782, when, with her father, she visited the museum where they

> could not but be entertained Sir Ashton came and talked to us a good while. He may be an admirable natural*ist*, but I think if in other matters you leave the 'ist' out, you will not wrong him. He looks fully sixty years old yet he had dressed not only two young men but himself, in a green jacket, a round hat with green feathers, a bundle of arrows under one arm, and a bow in the other, and thus accoutered as a forester he pranced about; while the younger fools, who were in the same garb, kept running to and fro in the garden carefully contriving to shoot at some mark, just as any of the company appeared at any of the windows. After such a specimen of his actions, you will excuse me if I give none of his conversation.

At this time Sir Ashton was 53, and on this occasion had apparently been entertaining some of his Toxophilite friends.[62]

That Sir Ashton should have appeared much older than his years is not surprising considering that he was in the throes of financial difficulties. In spite of the subscription list and admission fees, the museum expenses were more than its income. Besides the general upkeep, there was the cost of fuel to be considered, for he kept good fires in all the galleries nearly all the year round, resulting in extensive use of his capital. The first intimation of his difficulty was in January 1780 when the following notice appeared in the papers:[63]

> To the Nobility, Gentry, and Public at Large. The following Address is a duty incumbent upon Me who have, with a public spirited Intention, spared no Expence to render Great Britain unrivalled in her Display of the Rarities of Nature. This Grand Design I have actually carried into Execution, by forming a Collection (which raises the Astonishment of every Nation to the highest Pitch) surpassing in a considerable Degree all other Museums, both for the Multiplicity, the Scarcity, the Elegance, and the Ornamental Arrangement of the choisest Specimens of Natural Production for the Inspection of the Public. Besides this I have formed such Connections in all Parts of the World, as to divert in great measure every new Discovery to this Repository. Notwithstanding the above very flattering Expectations, and that everyone who views my Museum is in

[61] This portrait is to be found in Thos. Barritt's large folio of Pedigrees in Chetham's Library, where there is another version mentioned in L. Grindon, *Manchester Banks and Bankers*, (1878), 155.

[62] Sir Ashton acquired at this period the celebrated collection of bows and arrows of all nations from Richard Owen Cambridge, which found an honoured place in his museum. Earlier in 1778, Lever was unsuccessful in a bid to buy the Entomological Collection of Dru Drury.

[63] *Manchester Journal* 22 Jan. 1780; also *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, 1 March 1780.

Fig. 30: Sir Darcy Lever c. 1730.
Portrait by William Hogarth.

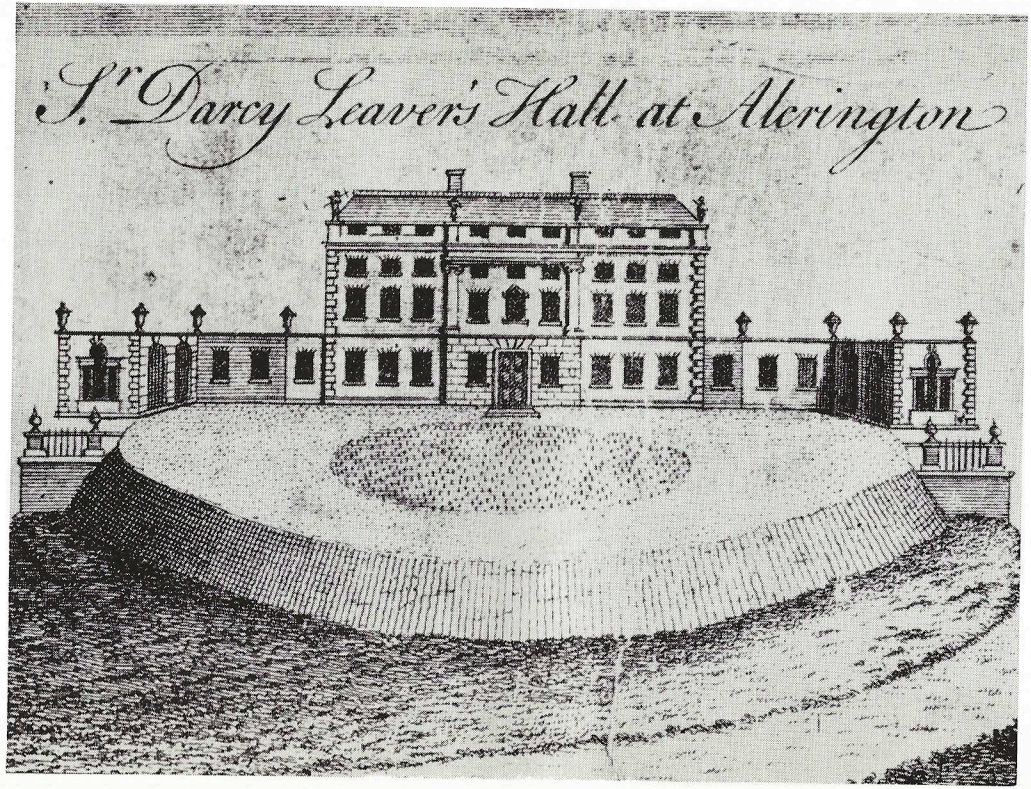
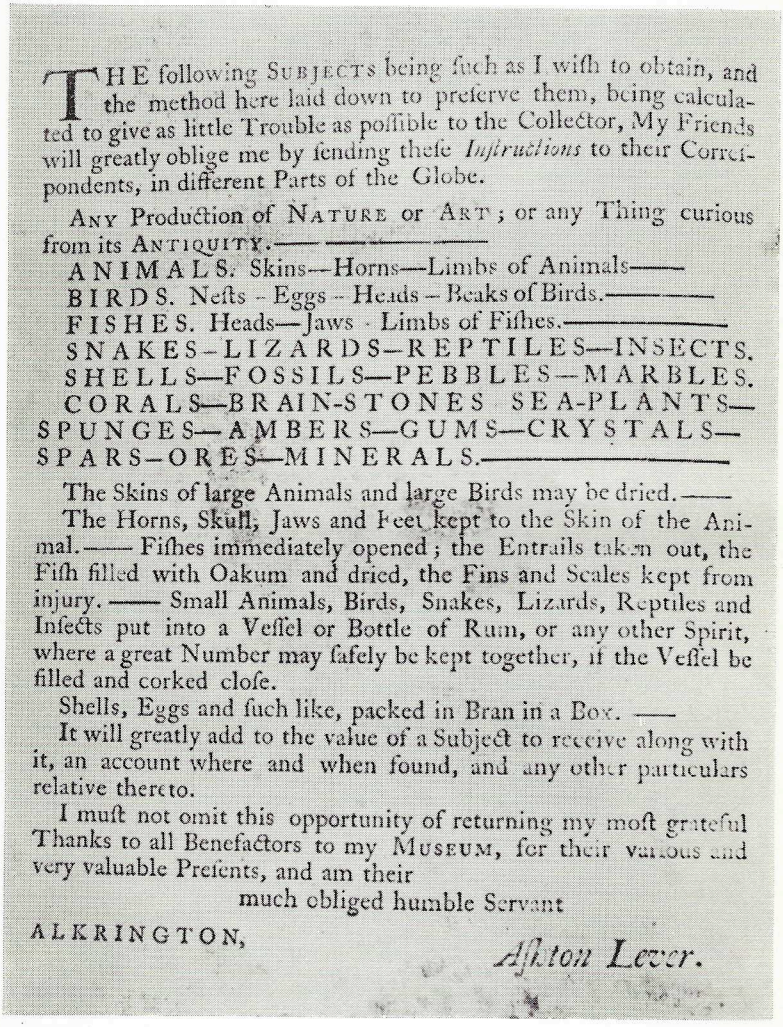


Fig. 31: ALKRINGTON HALL IN 1741, FROM THE FIRST EDITION OF CASSON AND BERRY'S MAP OF MANCHESTER, 1741.
Courtesy of the Feoffees, Chetham's Library.

Fig. 32: Sir Ashton Lever at the Age of Six in 1735.



THE following SUBJECTS being such as I wish to obtain, and the method here laid down to preserve them, being calculated to give as little Trouble as possible to the Collector, My Friends will greatly oblige me by sending these *Instructions* to their Correspondents, in different Parts of the Globe.

ANY Production of NATURE or ART; or any Thing curious from its ANTIQUITY.——————

ANIMALS. Skins—Horns—Limbs of Animals——
BIRDS. Nests - Eggs - Heads - Beaks of Birds.————
FISHES. Heads—Jaws - Limbs of Fishes.————
SNAKES-LIZARDS-REPTILES—INSECTS.
SHELLS—FOSSILS—PEBBLES—MARBLES.
CORALS—BRAIN-STONES SEA-PLANTS—
SPUNGES—AMBERS—GUMS—CRYSTALS—
SPARS-ORES—MINERALS.————————

The Skins of large Animals and large Birds may be dried.——
The Horns, Skull, Jaws and Feet kept to the Skin of the Animal.—— Fishes immediately opened; the Entrails taken out, the Fish filled with Oakum and dried, the Fins and Scales kept from injury. —— Small Animals, Birds, Snakes, Lizards, Reptiles and Insects put into a Vessel or Bottle of Rum, or any other Spirit, where a great Number may safely be kept together, if the Vessel be filled and corked close.

Shells, Eggs and such like, packed in Bran in a Box. ——

It will greatly add to the value of a Subject to receive along with it, an account where and when found, and any other particulars relative thereto.

I must not omit this opportunity of returning my most grateful Thanks to all Benefactors to my MUSEUM, for their various and very valuable Presents, and am their

much obliged humble Servant

ALKRINGTON,

Ashton Lever.

Fig. 33: INSTRUCTIONS TO COLLECTORS ISSUED IN 1770.

> Raptures, and declares it to be an Honour to the Nation; my Subscribers are so few (Though I have now persevered in my pursuit at a very great Expence, for the Space of five Years) that they actually do not pay the necessary Annual Disbursements. In justice to myself, therefore, I now submit to the consideration of the Nobility and Gentry, the Reasonableness of my expecting a more general subscription which, if it takes place, will encourage me to pursue my plan with my wonted Ardour; and I am bold to say this, as my whole Life will acquit me of any pecuniary Views. At the same Time it is highly proper to fix this on some certain Criterion, by which my future Conduct may be regulated. For this Purpose I must desire those who wish Success to my Pursuit, to send in their Names, betwixt this and the 1st of March, to my Secretary, Mr Waring, as Annual Subscribers; and if before that Day the Number amounts to Five Hundred, it shall be my Study to make Leicester House every Day more and more worthy (of) public attention. My Passion for Natural History, and New Discoveries therein, urge me to be indefatigable, and to spare neither Pains nor Cost to render this Nation conspicuous in this Branch of Knowledge.
>
> On the Contrary, should this Address fail of the Desired Effect, I shall then think myself at Liberty to dispose of the First Museum in the World to the best Advantage, and thereby reimburse myself for the extraordinary Expence I have incurred. I must own I shall in this Case truly regret the Publics Loss of the most innocent, the most rational, and the most instructive Entertainment ever opened to public view in this or any other Kingdom upon Earth.
>
> Ashton Lever.

It is evident from this appeal that the patronage promised by the nobility had never materialised. If Sir Ashton had been more businesslike in his arrangements before he brought his museum to London, and had acquired securities other than verbal assurances, the later story of his museum would have been much different. But he had been far too naive; too long had he buried himself amidst his curiosities away from the hubbub of the outside world.

The results of the appeal were at first promising, and in his enthusiasm, Sir Ashton put the following notice in the papers in the hope of attracting more subscribers;[64]

> As I find my real designs relative to my Museum are not sufficiently understood, it is highly proper that I should explain myself to the public, in a matter in which this nation at large is so materially concerned, and I the more cheerfully submit to this, as it will elucidate the liberality of my intentions. These are not only to prevent, after my death, this collection enriching any other nation, but to secure its permanency in this. By my own assiduity, and the generous presents of the friends to my undertaking, I have now in my possession the first museum in the world, and may with truth say I have done, and shall do more for the Encouragement of Natural History than most other men, as it will always be my study to render this house open to the public upon the easiest terms. Before I brought my collection to the metropolis, my house in the country was always open to all visitors, without the least expence to them, and it was a sensible satisfaction to me to show them every hospitality. The pleasure of pleasing is the only true pleasure I ever knew, nor

[64] 12 May 1780.

would everything the world can produce give me delight without sharers of my enjoyments.

I cannot therefore have a doubt but when my plan is duly considered by the nobility and gentry at large, my subscriptions must become general. They are already such as to confirm me in my pursuit, as I am so happy as to have his Majesty and several of the nobility at the head thereof, who do me the honour to approve my intentions, and to give me their support.

Ashton Lever.

The subscribers enjoyed certain privileges in the museum; 'Here', writes a visitor, 'is a collection of well-chosen Books of Natural History open to Subscribers in a Room set apart for their Study, where there is always a good Fire.' Moreover the museum was always open to them on Sundays between the hours of 1 and 3 p.m., when it was normally closed to the public.[65]

Whatever response this notice brought, it was inadequate in spite of the patronage and interest shown by the monarch, and in December 1780, Sir Ashton disposed of the remaining property at the top of Market Street Lane.[66] Altogether some 9 acres were sold to William Stevenson of Urmston, for the sum of £3,150. Since the early 1770's, Sir Ashton had sold or leased small plots from his Manchester properties and, on the disposal of the 9 acres in 1780, the Lever connection with Manchester came to an end.

A further appeal was published in November of the following year, which on this occasion, he addressed:

To the Nobility and Gentry of this Kingdom, particularly to the Members of both Houses of Parliament, the two Universities, and all Seminaries of Learning.

This address I think incumbent upon me, as my line of life at this House, makes me in some measure accountable to the Public for my conduct. I always thought the study of nature was of the greatest Utility, and conceived the forming (of) a Collection of Natural History, Superior in its kind, would rebound to my Honour. This determined me to enter upon the plan which I have at a very considerable expence, and with unwearied pains, been pursuing for a number of years.

Chimerical as my ideas seemed, they are actually carried into execution, and I am at this time, Sole possessor of the first Museum in the Universe. Notwithstanding which, and the strongest assurances I have repeatedly received from persons of the first consequence that my collection is a national object, it by no means meets with a proper support nor do I see the least possibility of reimbursing myself for the expence I have been at, but by disposing of it.

The duty, therefore, which I owe to myself and my relatives calls upon me to take the first offer which I think a reasonable one, from whatever quarter it may come; at the same time promising that I am ready to do my part to make it permanent in this Kingdom, and would gladly accord to any Proposals for that purpose, on the most liberal Terms, as I never had any pecuniary views.

[65] *M.M.*, 16 February 1779.

[66] This property had been acquired by the Levers in 1612 from John Hunt, and in 1737 there was a dispute of ownership between Sir Darcy Lever and John Andrews (descendant of Robert Lever of Darcy Lever), won by the former. This land is now bounded by Piccadilly, Port Street, Great Ancoats Street, and Tib Lane.

> I must confess I was vain enough to presume the Services I tendered the Public, would have met with general encouragement, as well as general applause. As long, however, as my Curiosities remain in this House it shall be open to all visitors, at the reduced price of half a crown, to give everyone an opportunity of judging how far my Ideas are extravagant in thinking it, as I confess I do, A great National Concern.
>
> Ashton Lever

Alas for Sir Ashton, the nobility showed neither interest nor concern, and their attitude may be illustrated in the remark passed by George Selwyn to Lord Carlisle in October 1781: 'All Sir Ashton Lever's fowls and beasts must go out of his ark at Leicester House.'[67]

In an effort to attract more attention, the admission price had been reduced to 2s. 6d.—a desperate venture—and a description of the Holophusicon appeared in the *European Magazine* in January 1782. The authorship of this is unknown, there is no signature, nom de plume, or initials, but the suspicion is that Sir Ashton was directly responsible for it. The closing paragraph reads:

> Those who have seen the Holophusicon must have very dull faculties indeed, who do not retain a lively impression of the pleasure they receive. The endless variety displayed in the beautiful plumage of the birds, the ferocious stare of the animals terrible to man; the malevolent aspect of the reptile race. They fill him with a majestic awe for the power of bones and claws . . . He beholds the manners of the men in the form of their habits; he sighs to recollect the prevalent power of fear and superstition over the human mind, when he views the rude deformity of an idol carved with a flint . . . In short he looks at the vast volumes of actual information that everywhere surrounds him, and is indeterminate where to begin, or on which to fix his attention most. Such at least were the sensations experienced by the writer of the present account, and such he thought it his duty to convey, as far as his plan and abilities permit, to his readers. A duty which gratitude owes to the public spirited proprietor, who has given his countrymen an opportunity of surveying the works of nature, and contemplating the various beings that inhabit the earth.

Public appeals having failed, Sir Ashton tried to interest private individuals, whom he believed to be sympathetic to his cause, to act as Trustees for the museum and be responsible for the annual disbursements required for Leicester House, while he, freed from these worries, could devote his time to cataloguing, and advertising. He was at this time faced with many debts and had become convinced that the only way to extricate himself was to auction the museum in the spring of 1784.

The idea that his museum should be split was abhorrent to him and an alternative way of disposing of it occurred to him late in

[67] *H.M.C.*, 15th Rept. VI, 526.

May 1783 when he presented the following Petition to Parliament:[63]

> All his Majesty's subjects that have visited my collection expressed their wish that it should be kept together in this kingdom, the following plan is submitted to the consideration of the Government. At present, there being no fund for the support of the establishment of the British Museum, and Parliament being frequently called upon for that purpose, it has been in contemplation to put a price on admission, which idea was given up on the report of some of its officers that the receipt would not amount to five hundred pounds a year. The receipt at Leicester House has been increasing every year, and last year it amounted to two thousand two hundred and fifty pounds. There is room in the British Museum for my collection to be added; and rather than it should be broken up and sold by auction, I am willing to take a sum much less than its intrinsic value, and to receive it in any mode that may be thought consistent with the present economical plan. In this case, when joined to the collection now in Montagu House, and the admission for the whole made half a crown, there is not the least doubt but it would produce a sum which would enable the trustees to collect, preserve, and pay its establishment for ever. Should his Majesty's Ministers disapprove of this plan, I humbly request that I may be permitted to dispose of my collection in one lot, dependant upon the national lottery as my dernier resource, to keep it together.
>
> Ashton Lever.

But the Government, which had earlier allowed the important Houghton Collection of paintings to be sold to the Empress of Russia, showed not the slightest inclination to act on Sir Ashton's generous terms; it was far too concerned with the aftermath of the American War of Independence, which had cost some £150,000,000. So Sir Ashton was obliged to resort to the 'dernier resource' and accordingly, on 9 February 1784, presented to Parliament a petition for a Bill to enable him to dispose of his museum by way of lottery.[69]

Between 1694 and 1799, the government instituted by Act of Parliament, seventy two lotteries, each associated with a loan or conversion of debt. This form of revenue was encouraged by the widespread love of gambling—a characteristic of the century—and though the government sought to preserve for themselves the privilege of raising money in this way, many private lotteries were organised. These were eventually prohibited by the Gaming Act of 1739, but occasionally special acts were passed to allow certain favoured individuals or semi-public bodies to make use of the lottery, often in conjunction with the government's state lotteries. Sir Ashton's Lottery Act was only the third to be allowed following the 1739 Gaming Act, the previous two being the Adelphi lottery,

[68] *H.M.C., Kenyon MSS.*, XIV, app. 4, 515.
[69] *J.H.C.*, XXXIX, 894.

1774, and Cox's Museum lottery, 1775.[70] (It will be remembered that the British Museum was founded by a lottery in 1753).

In the forementioned petition, Sir Ashton Lever referred to his earlier petition where he was in

> Hopes that it would have been purchased for the Use and Benefit of the Public, yet from the critical situation of the Times, it has been thought improper to apply for the Indulgence of Parliament in the mode he intended otherwise to have done, and it cannot easily be disposed of in the common Way of Sale: And therefore praying That Leave may be given to bring in a Bill to authorise and impower the Petitioner, his Executors, Administrators, and Assigns, to sell and dispose of the said Museum and Collection and the several Pieces composing the same, in such Manner as the Petitioner, (etc) shall think proper, without being liable or subject to any Penalty or Forfeiture, imposed by any Act or Acts of Parliament against any Sale or Sales By Way of Lottery or Lotts, Tickets, Numbers, or Figures; and that such Sale or Sales so to be made of the said Museum, and of the several Pieces composing the same by the Petitioner, (etc) (before a Day in the Act to be specified) may be good and valid, and Law or Statute to the contrary thereof notwithstanding; or otherwise, as to the House shall seem meet.
> Ordered That the said Petition do lie upon the Table.

On 1 March the Petition was read for the second time and a Committee was set up to examine the matter.[71] The chairman was Bamber Gascoyne Jnr., M.P. for Liverpool, who on the 12 March reported to the House, that the Committee had examined Thomas Waring, the manager and superintendant of the museum, who had outlined the magnitude of the collection, and the proable expense to which Sir Ashton had been put, estimated to have been £50,000; he also estimated that the annual cost of keeping it at Leicester House amounted to some £1,200 and that, since the museum opened in London in 1775, the income had amounted to some £12,000. Other figures given at a later date showed that receipts in the last three years before the lottery draw had amounted to £1,833 per annum. A Mr. Thomas Tenant, a collector of natural history for more than twenty years, was next examined and in his opinion Sir Ashton's collection was far superior in all respects to those he had seen in Holland, France, Portugal, at Brussels, Dresden, Brunswick and Vienna. Mr. John Church was next examined, 'he had amused himself many years in collecting natural curiosities', and he had taken the trouble to estimate the value of Sir Ashton's collection, basing his figures on the sales of similar articles to those in the museum. He rated the museum to be worth £53,000 and concluded his statement by saying that if the museum was to be dispersed it 'would be a Discredit to this Country.'

70 C. L'Estrange Ewen *Lotteries and Sweepstakes* (1932).
71 For the progress of the Petition and resulting Bill see *J.H.C.*, XXXIX and J.H.L., XXXVII, from which the following account is taken.

No scientist, naturalist, or scholar was evidently called upon to venture an opinion but Sir William Hamilton volunteered to give his, which was that he had visited Sir Ashton's museum very often, and while he had seen every museum, both public and private, in Holland, France, Germany, Italy and Sicily, he thought Sir Ashton's museum, 'the first he had seen.'

Following the report it was ordered that:

> Leave be given to bring in a Bill for enabling Sir Ashton Lever to dispose of His Collection of Natural History, exhibited in Leicester Fields by Way of Chance, in such Manner as may be most for his benefit; and that Mr Gascoyne, Jnr., Mr Attorney General, Mr Solicitor General, Sir Thomas Egerton, and Mr Stanley, do prepare and bring in the same.

Three days later Bamber Gascoyne Jnr. presented to the House a Bill which passed the three readings and was then referred to the House of Lords for their sanction in July.

The progress of this Bill was closely watched and reported in the *Manchester Chronicle*. On 17 April 1784 it was reported that:

> Sir Ashton Lever's Museum is to be disposed of in this manner. There are to be forty thousand tickets, at one guinea each, and only one prize, viz., the whole collection.

The strain of these events undermined Sir Ashton's health and he was obliged to leave London and seek rest at Buxton in May and June with his wife and niece.[72] The museum in London was left in the care of one of the trustees nominated in the Act, a close friend of Lever's, T. B. Bayley, who wrote in June to Lord Sidney, Secretary of State:

> I am now at Leicester House, aiding my friend and relative Sir Ashton Lever (now sick in Buxton) in soliciting a Bill to enable him to dispose of his invaluable Museum by a lottery. May I request yr Lordships patronage of this Bill.[73]

Lord Sidney was later a member of the Committee of the House of Lords appointed to consider the Bill.

Meanwhile in the Commons the question of the Bill was being settled in committee. Thomas Stanley was in the chair and Bamber Gascoyne Jnr. moved the different parts of the Bill which were then debated. It was at first proposed to allow Sir Ashton to raise the sum of £42,000 by means of the lottery, but Lord Surrey thought the sum far in excess of the museum's worth and moved that the amount be altered to £21,000. The motion was defeated

[72] *Manchester Chronicle*, 15 May 1784.
[73] P.R.O., HO 42/4,316/317. I am grateful to A. G. Rose for this reference and certain others.

and later the sum of £37,800 was agreed upon, i.e. 36,000 tickets at a guinea each. By a clause in the Bill the museum was to be vested in Trusteees, who were to be Daines Barrington, Bamber Gascoyne Jnr., John Blackburne, T. B. Bayley and Thomas Stanley; but Lord Surrey became apprehensive that by this means the creditors of Sir Ashton would be deprived of all claim on it. Assurances were given by the trustees to be appointed, that the creditors would not be defrauded and that, when the lottery draw took place, there would be no incumbrances lest the winning ticket holder should find his prize subject to debts—as was the case with the earlier Adelphi Lottery, where the houses that were the prize were subject to mortgages.

Before the Bill went to the House of Lords in July, the ethics of the lottery came in for comment by Messrs. Hussey, Sloper and Eden, who were opposed to all forms of lottery, but while they sympathised with the position of Sir Ashton, they thought that:

> in the purchase of the Museum, (he) had followed his own inclination, and certainly had no right to call on the public for any indemnification whatever.[74]

On the question being put, whether the Bill should pass the House, a division was called for, but on more mature deliberation the division was relinquished, and the Bill allowed to go on. The House of Lords agreed to the Bill without any amendments, and their reply was sent to the Commons by Messrs. Holford and Anguish. On 20 July the Act was passed to 'enable Sir Ashton Lever to dispose of his Museum as now exhibited at Leicester House by Way of Chance.'

The substance of the Act was as follows:[75]

> Be it enacted . . . that it shall and may be lawful to and for the same Ashton Lever . . . to sell and dispose of the Museum, and the several pieces composing the same (the drawings of Miss Sarah Stone only excepted) by way of Chance, without being liable or subject to any penalties or forfeiture imposed by any Act of Parliament against the sale by way of lottery, or by lots, tickets numbers, or figures, etc . . . The money to be raised not to exceed the sum of £37,800, the number of tickets not to exceed 36,000 . . . The sale to be advertised in the London Gazette, . . . The whole Museum to constitute one prize only, to be determined by the drawing of the first State Lottery that shall consist of 36,000 tickets or upwards, and drawn between 25 September 1785 and 2 February 1786, the first number drawn thereof to be entitled to the prize . . . That if no State Lottery be drawn within that time then Sir Ashton, his exors etc., be empowered to put the whole numbers under the inspection of the trustees into a Wheel in a manner as is used in the State Lottery, and the draw to be made between the 2 February and the 25 March 1786.

74 *Manchester Chronicle*, 17 July 1784.
75 24 Geo iii, sess.2., c. 22.

The Schedule appended to this Act gives a total of 26,662 exhibits of which 2,654 were birds contained in 1,972 glass cases.

The announcement of the lottery appeared in the *London Gazette* on 16 October 1784 and was repeated in the national papers during the following year—up to August 1785 in the *Manchester Mercury*. Tickets were announced on sale at Leicester House, from Messrs. Harrop and Berry in Manchester, and at most of the principal towns in England.

By his Act Sir Ashton was to have his lottery drawn between 25 September 1785 and 2 February following, by a state lottery if one should be drawn during that time. But the next state lottery following the Act was fixed for the 6 February 1786, therefore by virtue of a clause in the Act, the draw was to take place sometime between the 2 February and the 25 March 1786, under the inspection of the Trustees named in the Act. Notice of the draw was given in the *Manchester Mercury* 3 January 1786 in which the public was informed that from the number of tickets then sold, the museum would become either a private collection, be taken abroad, or sold off in lots by the prize winner, therefore they should take the opportunity of viewing at Leicester House before the day. When the notice appeared in the next issue of the paper the following was added:

> But should this Collection be kept together in any part of the kingdom, fortunate it will be for the Town and Neighbourhood where it may be fixed; for when in *Lancashire* the Inns in and near *Manchester* were constantly filled with Company from all Parts, who came on Purpose to view it: and Sir *Ashton* admitted above 18,000 persons the *summer* before he brought it to *London*.
>
> From the above Circumstance, is it not of great Moment to every City, Town-corporate, or otherwise, to have a Subscription by the Inhabitants in each City etc., conjointly for the Purpose of obtaining so valuable a Museum, which will be a lasting Monument of Fame and Benefit to the Place and Possessions thereof.

and a few weeks later the following was added to an already lengthy notice:

> Never was there so great a Chance offered to the Public as the above Lottery, whereby a Purchaser of a single ticket, Value only One Guinea, may be immediately put into possession of a Property, that this Nation was thought too poor to purchase. It was proved to the Satisfaction of Sir *Ashton Lever's* Committee of the House of Commons, that the Articles in Leicester House were superior to every Museum in Europe, and upon a Valuation likewise before the same Committee, the Collection in this Museum was estimated at upwards of Fifty Thousand Pounds.[76]

These two additions to the original notice show signs of the poor response the public made to the lottery, for from the time of the

[76] *M.M.*, 7 Feb. 1786.

Fig. 34: SIR ASHTON LEVER 'CLOUT' SHOOTING, PAINTED BY THOMAS BARRITT. (His coat is green and round his neck hangs the presidential badge of the Toxophilite Society).

Courtesy of the Feoffees, Chetham's Library.

Fig. 35: MINIATURE PORTRAIT OF SIR ASHTON LEVER.
An engraving of this portrait appeared in 1784.

passing of the Act and the selling of the tickets in October 1784 to the drawing of the winning ticket in March 1786, only 8,000 out of the total of 36,000 were sold, so for all his trouble Ashton received only £8,400. In the *General Advertiser* for 27 March 1786, this low figure was attributed to lack of publicity, but this is doubtful having regard to the notices that appeared in the Manchester papers of the time (although in local papers in other parts of the country his appeals may have been neglected), and to the article on Ashton Lever and the museum which appeared in the *European Magazine* in August 1784. A more likely explanation might be found in the reluctance of the public to burden themselves with what they believed to be a 'white elephant'. The fact that Sir Ashton had to dispose of his museum for financial reasons would make a deep impression in spite of the assurances given by the proprietor that the income was adequate for the expenses incurred.

The final arrangements for the lottery were published in the *Manchester Mercury* 21 March 1786, almost two years after the Bill had been first presented to Parliament. The notice appeared under the signatures of Thomas Stanley, Bamber Gascoyne Jnr., and John Blackburne, who announced that the draw would take place in the Guildhall of the City of London on the 23 of the month under their inspection and that of the Commissioners appointed to superintend the drawing of the State Lottery. The ticket numbers were to be placed in the wheel on 20 March at Leicester House, when any interested parties concerned could be present. The wheel would then be taken to the Guild Hall and placed under the surveyance of Treasury officials to await the day of the draw.

The first ticket drawn on the 23rd, was ticket number 34,119,[77] which had been sold in December 1784. The holder was a James Parkinson, a lawyer by profession who was also one of the proprietors of Ranelagh. According to a later visitor, Sophie la Roche, there was a five-week delay between the announcing of the winning ticket and the holder coming forward to claim his prize, and it was thought during this time that an unknown benefactor was not claiming the prize in order that Sir Ashton could retain the museum and the amount raised by lottery. After claiming his prize, James Parkinson generously allowed Sir Ashton, 'the entire Benefit of Exhibiting that Choice Collection one whole Year longer, at the same Place, and on the same state it was before the Lottery began Drawing.'[78] Some went to see the collection ten

[77] This ticket was later exhibited in the Leverian Museum at the Rotunda, and was sold in 1806, together with a letter from 'Hyder Ally' for 11s. 6d.
[78] *M.M.*, 4 Apr. 1786.

or twenty times during this time, for Sir Ashton's loss had captured the public's sympathy—all but too late. One visitor was Sophie la Roche who, in her Journal,[79] gives a glimpse of Sir Ashton at this time:

> Of all these sights the most charming and unique was the person of Sir Ashton himself, a good friendly man of some fifty years or so, who addressed us courteously, though briefly, remarking that as we were foreign we would not see the collection so often, and so he would show us the most important things himself; and then proceeded to guide us round. Our pleasure and admiration both pleased and pained him. 'I myself come here daily,' he said, 'to view these objects which I cherish as old friends; for one day they will be in strange hands and I shall not see them again. It was a passion of mine to possess all nature's wonders; no expense was spared; I have spent over a million on it, and now that I am old, I find I have hardly enough to be able to live in comfort, so was obliged to auction it all by lottery. But an evil star was in my wake—I made out 30,000 lots, each at a guinea, and settled on a time for the draw. I had hardly sold 7,000 lots when the day came round—I had to keep my word, and the first drew my collection.' We saw that the thought depressed him and did not inquire further.

While Sir Ashton was enjoying the 'benefit' granted him by Parkinson, the latter gentleman formed a company to build a new home for the museum. This was the Rotunda, built near Blackfriars Bridge, on the Surrey side; the architect was James Burton, and here the Leverian Museum—as it became known—remained on public view until 1806 when it was sold by public auction. It is at this point that the earlier story of the Museum was repeated, when Parkinson

> offered it to the present administration. Lord Grenville referred it to Lord Henry Petty, who approved the proposal and the conditions offered by Parkinson viz.: £20,000 not to be exceeded whatever it might be valued at by persons appointed, and less if it should be valued under the Sum . . . But Ministers declined responsibility and referred it to Sir Joseph Banks who disapproved purchasing it. Parkinson says Sir Joseph hated Sir Ashton Lever and therefore hates the collection.[80]

It is very likely that Sir Joseph was also responsible for the Government's rejection of Sir Ashton's similar offer in 1783. At the auction in 1806, the collection—which had been considerably added to—brought in a total of £4,115 10s. 6d., with many of the exhibits going to supplement other private collections, principally those of Sayer Cumings at Kennington, William Bullock in Piccadilly, the Earl of Derby at Knowsley Hall, and the Emperor Fran-

[79] *Sophie in London, op. cit.* See also Fred. Aug. Wendeborn, *Der Zustand des Staats, der Religion . . . in Grosbritannien gegen das Ende des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts*, (Berlin 1785), II, 141 *et seq.*

[80] *Farington Diary*, ed. J. Grieg (1924), III, 273.

cis I of Austria who acquired most of Cook's collection—but there was no representative from the British Museum.[81]

Sir Ashton retired to Alkrington, leaving Thomas Waring in Leicester House where he stayed until the building was demolished in 1790; Waring then began business as a bowyer with premises in Charlotte Street and later published a *Treatise on Archery*. At Alkrington, Sir Ashton lived for a little over a year and it was while attending the Sessions at the Bull's Head Inn, Manchester on the 29 January 1788, that he was taken suddenly ill, 'with a cold Shivering fit', and on Friday 1 February, a few weeks before his fifty ninth birthday, died. His funeral was held at Prestwich on the 7th and was attended by a large retinue of friends, fifteen carriages following his remains to the grave.[82] Obituaries appeared in the local press and in the *European Magazine* and *Gentleman's Magazine,* in which he is described as 'a naturalist, a gentleman, a scholar and philanthropist.'

His collection lacked the discrimination and taste of many other private collections, everything and anything found a place, the biggest, the smallest, the most colourful, and the most curious, but in this Sir Ashton was true to the name that he gave to his collection—the *Holophusicon*—'embracing all of Nature'. The public went to see and to wonder at the marvels of nature and of man's ingenuity. The wide variety of exhibits and the differing degree of quality were as spice to the appetites of the curious public; they came to be impressed and were not disappointed and for this they were prepared to pay. Many other more specialised collections, those of Sir Joseph Banks, John Hunter and Sir Hans Sloane (in the British Museum) were open to students and often to the public without charge, but fine though these collections were, they did not enjoy the popularity of Lever's museum.

Sir Ashton Lever's widow, Dame Frances, who is but a shadowy figure in his life, lived for another fourteen years, dying on 27 July 1802. On her death, Sir Ashton's nephew John, the youngest son of the Rev. John Lever,[83] came into his full inheritance, for in his will, made in March the year before he died, Sir Ashton left what

[81] See *Museum Association Journal,* 1891, article by Prof. Alfred Newton. The sale lasted sixty five days from 5 May to 18 July 1806. The lots numbered 7,879 and the catalogue filled 410 pages.

[82] *Barritt MSS.*, large fol., Pedigrees.

[83] John Lever, curate at Buxton in 1771, was vicar of Carlingford in Armagh from 1777 to 1793 and then until his death in Feb. 1807 vicar of Colpe in Meath diocese. He married Mary, daughter of Isaac Shaw of Altringham, and they had two sons, Darcy b. 1760, and John, b. 1768, and two daughters, Dorothy, b. 1767 and Mary who died in 1842. John Lever died in 1834 without surviving issue (Ashton, a son, died in 1804), and was buried in Prestwich Church. Darcy Lever, after a colourful life—he was an amateur actor, eminent flautist, and wrote a manual on seamanship—died in Edinburgh in 1839. His three sons all predeceased him, unmarried, and from his daughters, Elizabeth Dorothy, b. 1795, and Frances, b. 1800, are decended the present representatives of the Lever family of Alkrington.

remained of his estate both real and personal to his wife who was to have a lifetime interest in them and on her death the same was to go to his nephew John: certain legacies, however, were to be paid out from the estate before the principal beneficiaries could enjoy the same.

The Lever connection with Alkrington came to an end in 1845, when the hall and estate were sold by Dorning Rasbotham—nephew of John Lever—to the Lees brothers of Clarksfield, Oldham, for £57,550.

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POSTSCRIPT

Since the above account was set up in type, H. M. Colvin of St. John's College, Oxford, has kindly communicated to the author that the architect for Alkrington Hall was Giacomo Leoni (1686-1746) the architect of Lyme Hall, Lathom House and Bold Hall. The evidence for this statement comes from a MS. list of eighteenth century English houses compiled by some contemporary master-builder, probably resident in the North of England, found by Mrs. John Harris in an American library, and shortly to be published by Mrs. Harris and H. M. Colvin.